

China and the Whole

A nation with a rigid thousand-year-old testing system struggles to implement a more holistic approach to education.

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Half a century ago, Mao Tse-tung articulated the central aim of Chinese education: "Our educational policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually, and physically and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture" (1957). China embraced, in theory, Mao's appeal for educating the whole child, and this approach remains the guiding principle for education in China today. Yet it has had a minimal effect on Chinese education.

Overworked, Underrested

Students in China continue to be burdened with long school days, mountains of homework, and time-consuming school-oriented extracurricular activities. Sleep deprivation among students as a result of excessive schoolwork is a persistent problem. According to the Beijing Education Commission, over 60 percent of students don't get sufficient sleep (Zhang, 2006). On weekdays, students leave for school at



approximately 7:00 a.m.; they typically get home around 6:00 p.m., with at least two or three hours of homework to complete. On weekends, students attend tutoring sessions, training courses for various contests, or test preparation events (Liu & Liu, 2004; Lv & Song, 2005). They are simply too busy to sleep or engage in leisure activities.

Lack of sleep isn't the only problem the education system has to deal with. Over 90 percent of Chinese students go to school for extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, reasons; fewer than 9 percent of students study because they like it (Office of the National Children Working Committee & China Youth and Children Research Institute, 2000).

Moreover, a recent survey of physical fitness in China found that obesity is on the rise and that children's health is declining at an alarming rate. According to the *China Education Daily*,

Many students have lost their happy childhoods, the room for self-development, and the ability to develop diverse abilities due to the excessive amount of homework, too many tests and exams, too little sleep, too little physical activity, and too few opportunities for interactions with society. (Shen, 2006)

The Tyranny of the Test

What is to blame? Test-oriented education. In a 1997 policy document, the National Education Commission (now the Chinese Ministry of Education) enumerated the problems associated

Child

with test-oriented education: an overemphasis on preparing students for tests; lack of moral, social, emotional, physical, and work-oriented education; a reliance on rote memorization and mechanical drills; a narrow focus on the few high achievers and neglect of the majority of students; low student engagement; and lack of creativity. "Test-oriented education violates the Education Law . . . and deviates from our education policy," noted the Ministry. "We must take all effective measures to promote quality education and free elementary and secondary schools from test-oriented education."

As early as 1898, at the risk of losing his life, a reformer in the late Qing dynasty criticized the 1,000-year-old testing system before Emperor Guangxu. He blamed the loss of the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War on standardized testing because it produced, according to him, useless bookworms (Li, 2005). Under increasing pressure to develop new education systems to prepare candidates with practical talents that could reverse the empire's decline, the emperor signed a decree in 1905 to end the practice of using standardized testing to select government officials.

But tradition dies hard. In 1955, standardized exams were resurrected as the mechanism to admit students into colleges. Although the exams were abandoned in 1966, with the start of the Cultural Revolution, they were reinstated 11 years later. Ever since, the country has battled the negative influence of tests.

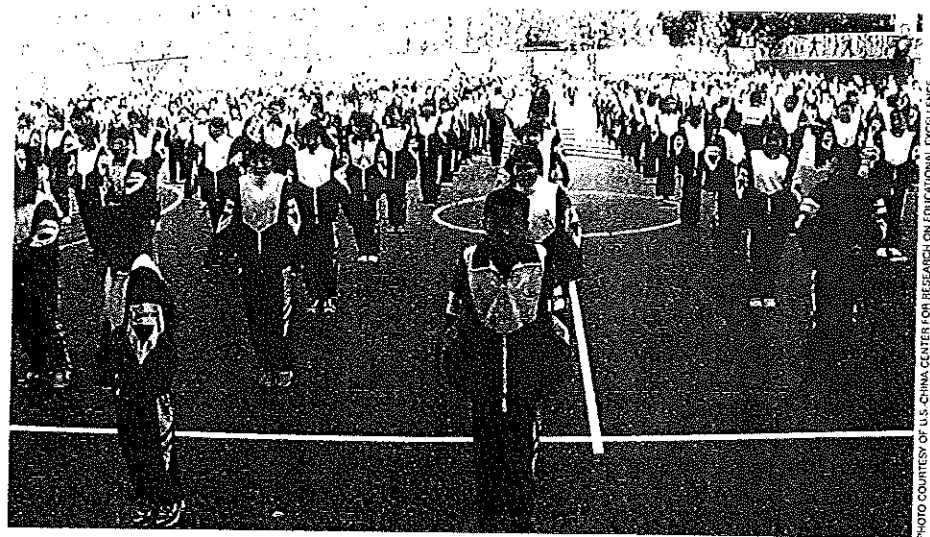


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"Quality Education"

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese government repeatedly emphasized, both in its constitution and various laws, the importance of nurturing a well-rounded citizenry. The 1986 Compulsory Education Law (National Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2006) states that the supreme goal of education in China is "the well-rounded development of children and adolescents in morality, intellect, and physical well-being." In 1993, the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CCCCP) and the Chinese State Council released the Framework for Education Reform and Development in China, which demanded that

secondary and elementary schools move away from "test-oriented education" toward one that develops the qualities of all citizens, that serves all students, and that comprehensively enhances students' qualities in morality and ethics, culture and sciences, labor and applied skills, as well as physical health and psychological and emotional capacities.

In 1999, the government launched a massive reform with the release of its *Decision to Promote Quality Education*, with "quality education" specifically referring to a balanced curriculum and educating well-rounded students.

Announcing a series of historic changes in Chinese education, the document

- Abolished the practice of using an entrance examination for middle school. (Primary school graduation exams often served as entrance exams to middle schools.)

- Encouraged elementary and secondary schools to implement their own graduation examinations instead of using ones produced by county education bureaus.

- Encouraged local governments to develop new approaches for assessing schools, teachers, and students that were consistent with the spirit of quality education.

- Forbade local governments from imposing admission rates on schools—that is, expecting a certain percentage of middle and high school students to gain admittance into the next higher level of schooling—and from using admission rates as measures of school quality.

- Reformed college entrance exams and admissions criteria and granted colleges more autonomy in admissions decisions.

- Expanded access to higher education so that by 2010, enrollment in higher education should reach 15 percent of the college-age population. (In 1999, 9 percent of college-age youth

Each year, schools recognize students whose behavior is exemplary in three domains: moral, academic, and physical.

were enrolled in higher education.)

■ Reformed school curriculum and diversified textbooks to encourage greater variation in content and pedagogy and to provide content that reflects local contexts. (CCCCP & the Chinese State Council, 1999)

Setting Its Sights on the Whole Child

Indeed, over the past several years, education in China has experienced remarkable changes. Eleven provinces¹ have been granted the autonomy to implement their own, rather than the national, college entrance exam, and two universities can now use oral interviews in lieu of written tests to admit students. Fifty-nine of China's 1,800 colleges have been granted the right to select 5 percent of their students using their own criteria—such as writing and communications skills and special talents in sports and the arts—in addition to test scores from the national entrance exam ("Six More Universities," 2007). Moreover, the central government has implemented a new national college entrance exam, called 3 + X. Provinces and colleges test students in three required subjects—mathematics, Chinese, and English—plus one additional subject of the student's choice. The "X" can mean an additional single subject, such as history, geography, or chemistry, or several subjects—such as chemistry, physics, and biology combined.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education introduced a set of policy actions that included developing curriculum standards to replace the national syllabus. This allowed all publishers to publish textbooks following the new curriculum standards and granted local governments

the right to decide what textbooks to use, effectively ending the government's 50-year monopoly on the provision of textbooks.

The policy also called for restructuring school curriculum to allow for more flexibility. The new curriculum promotes patriotism, collectivism, and Chinese culture as well as fostering creativity, practical skills, the scientific and humanistic spirit, environmental awareness, and physical and mental fitness (Ministry of Education, 2001). The curriculum divides school time into the following five domains, with specific percentages of time allocated to each domain for all nine years of compulsory education:

- Academic learning, which includes history, geography, science, Chinese, math, and foreign languages (53 percent)
- Moral education (8.5 percent)
- Arts and music (10 percent)
- Physical education and health (10.5 percent)
- Integrated studies, which includes community service, information technology, inquiry/project-based learning, and vocational and technical education (18 percent)

Chinese elementary and middle schools have fully implemented this national curriculum framework. The reform continues at the high school level.

The efforts to prepare well-rounded citizens and educate the whole child in China have not been limited to curriculum reform. In addition to classwork and various indoor and outdoor activities, students are required to participate in physical fitness exercises. In one elementary school in Jiangsu province, for example, morning exercise takes place at 7:30 a.m. on the playground. Students dance to music following a

prescribed sequence of physical movements. They also spend about 4 minutes twice a day before class starts doing eye health exercises, a common activity in Chinese schools.

Students also participate in cleaning activities for 20 minutes each day. This involves cleaning the classroom and public facilities in the school, including the playground and toilets. These activities develop good work habits in students, a sense of responsibility for the collective, and a respect for manual labor.

The government has also developed criteria for evaluating students' moral development and distributed these guidelines for posting in all schools in China:

1. Love the motherland, the people, and the Chinese Communist Party.
 2. Obey all laws and regulations and enhance awareness of the law. Follow school rules and common social morals.
 3. Love science, study hard, enjoy thinking and questioning, enjoy exploration and inquiry, and actively participate in community service and other beneficial activities.
 4. Cherish life, live safely, engage in physical exercise, and practice good personal hygiene.
 5. Develop self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence, and self-reliance, and lead a healthy and civilized life.
 6. Actively engage in manual labor, be frugal and industrious, and take care of your possessions.
 7. Show respect to your parents, teachers, and elders, and be polite.
 8. Love the collective (the community), befriend your classmates, and help and care for others.
 9. Be honest, practice what you preach, correct your mistakes, and be responsible.
 10. Love nature and take care of your environment (Ministry of Education, 2004).
- Selecting and honoring the "Three-Good Student," or *sanhao xuesheng*, is another mechanism China uses to

promote educating the whole child. Each year, all education institutions in China, from elementary schools to universities, engage in the elaborate process of selecting students whose behavior is exemplary in three domains ("three-good"): moral, academic, and physical. The Three-Good Students must exhibit a variety of exemplary traits, such as loving their country, being socially and civically responsible, enthusiastically serving the collective, being respectful and ethical, exhibiting excellence in academics as evidenced by top grades, regularly exercising, and performing well in school physical fitness classes. Students evaluate a short list of candidates generated by teacher or student nominations, and their recommendations go to a schoolwide evaluation committee composed of teachers, school administrators, and, in some schools, students. Schools award the three-good honor to less than five percent of the student population. A smaller portion of selected students proceed to the county level; some make it to the next round of competition at the provincial level. Every few years, a few hundred students are recognized at the national level.

The Three-Good Student is not just an honorary title but carries practical incentives as well. Depending on the level, this title can mean money, fellowships, and, most important for high school students, added points on their college entrance exams or priority consideration in college admissions.


A Long and Winding Road

Despite this focus on educating the whole child and recent reforms in curriculum and testing practices, translating the vision into practice in China will most likely be an uphill battle. According to a recent national study by the Ministry of Education ("Ministry of Education's Report," 2006), although many educators seem to have accepted the concept of "quality education" and some teachers have changed their

teaching practices, by and large the focus on the whole child remains lip service. "Quality education is loudly spoken, but test-oriented education gets the real attention," notes the report. As a result, competition among students remains fierce, schools and teachers continue to teach to the test at the expense of students' physical and mental health, test preparation overrides national curriculum requirements, and some

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schools resort to militaristic ways of managing their students. Under intense pressure, students spend all their time and energy on schoolwork.

The intense pressure placed on everyone—on students, parents, teachers, school leaders, local education administrators, and even local government leaders—comes from a single source: college entrance exams. China must drastically reform its college admission system to expand admission criteria beyond student test scores on a limited number of subjects. Only then can efforts to educate the whole child bear fruit. 

¹ Policies of China's central government technically affect 22 provinces, 5 province-equivalent autonomous regions, and 4 municipalities.

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Author's note: All references refer to documents written in Chinese. For clarity, I have translated committee names and document titles into English.

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